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ABSTRACT

Studies of interpersonal helping processes have identified accurate empathic understanding as a skill significantly associated with effective helping. In recent years empathy training has become something of a fad, often involving expensive, time consuming marathon weekends. In reaction to this trend a self-instructional package was designed to teach empathic reponding. Results indicate that materials were effective in both individual and small group versions. There was no difference on judges' rating of performance of students taking materials individually or in small groups. Students' ratings of performance did not correlate with judges' ratings. (Author)

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Studies of interpersonal helping processes have identified accurate empathic understanding as a skill significantly associated with effective helping. In recent years empathy training has become something of a fad, often involving expensive, time consuming marathon weekends. In reaction to this trend a self-instructional package was designed to teach empathic responding. Results indicate that materials were effective in both individual and small group versions. There was no difference on judges' rating of performance of students taking materials individually or in small groups. Students' ratings of performance did not correlate with judges' ratings.

Since Krathwohl's Taxonomy was published in 1964, there has been much talk about educators' responsibility to include instruction from the affective domain in their students' learning. McMurrin (1969) points out that, "The affective function of instruction ... is concerned with the dispositions of practical life--motives, passions, the esthetic and moral sensitivities, and feelings of concern, appreciation, sympathy, and attachment (p. 8)."

Perhaps affective learning has no more important a place in learning than it does in the training of human service professionals. Counselors, social workers, teachers and doctors are confronted daily with a variety of affective situations. Their ability to handle such situations appropriately can have a significant impact on their clients' lives.

Studies of interpersonal helping processes such as client-centered counseling and psychotherapy have focused on those helpers who have achieved highest success rates, in terms of client outcomes (Rogers, 1957; Rogers, Ginlin, Keisler, and Truax, 1967; Truax, 1963; Truax and Carkhuff, 1963; Whitehorn and Betz, 1954). A common finding of these diverse studies was that accurate empathic understanding was one of three central interpersonal skills significantly associated with effective helping (the other two were genuineness and non-possessive warmth). Bergin and Garfield (1971) state that, "Accurate empathic understanding involves the ability to perceive and communicate accurately and with sensitivity both the feeling and experiences of another person and their meaning and significance (p. 317)."

In recent years empathy training has become something of a fad--often involving expensive, time-consuming marathon weekends--often presented in a somewhat nebulous fashion as to what good responding looks like. In reaction to this trend a self-instructional package was designed as an attempt to effectively teach empathic responding inexpensively, within a reasonably limited period of time (a one-day mini-course), and in a form readily available to interested students.

The mini-course was designed by John Milnes, a graduate social work student, in a Special Studies course with Professor Harvey Bercher of the University of Michigan's School of Social Work. Some of the ideas for content grew out of the work of Truax and Carkhuff (1967). Skills covered in the materials include: identifying feeling words, selecting synonyms, identifying levels of empathic understanding, distinguishing between thinking statements and feeling statements, creating empathic statements, and determining when to use them.

The course was designed to be "group self-instructional." While the instructional information is carried in a booklet accompanied by taped examples and does not require the involvement of a faculty member, the students participate in group exercises which require the practice of newly-learned skills. The group also serves to provide additional feedback to its members. The group format was selected for two reasons: 1) studies on problem solving (Collins and Guetzkow, 1964) and "brain storming" (Taylor, Berry and Block, 1958; and Barnlund, 1959) have demonstrated that groups are generally superior to individuals in solving the same problems; and 2) the group format is a natural medium to learn and practice a skill used in group settings.

The final unit is a criterion exercise and requires each learner to demonstrate his responding skills in a roleplay situation. Since the mini-course was designed to be independent of faculty involvement, the members of the group serve to evaluate each others' performances. It was hoped that the absence of grades (the course is offered as a no fee-no credit basis) and instructors, and the small group size would encourage participation and risk-taking by students.

The booklet and pre-recorded tape that comprise the course's instructional materials were first tried with three six-person groups of graduate social work students and subsequently revised by Professor Bertcher. It is this revised version that was used in the evaluation experiment described in this paper.

Questions examined during the evaluation of the mini-course were:

1. Can empathic responding be learned through self-instruction?
2. Is there an advantage to group interaction during the instruction?
3. Can the learners provide each other with valid evaluation of their learning?

Design of the experiment. The eighteen graduate students from the School of Social Work who volunteered for the mini-course were randomly assigned to one of three groups: A, B or C. Students in group A went through the self-instructional materials as a group of six persons. Each student read the instructional materials privately, then performed the exercises and interacted with the other members of the group about the performance of various members.

Group B students went through essentially the same materials as Group A students except that each learner was in a separate room and was not able to interact with other students. Students in Group C served as a control group and did not receive instruction before taking the criterion test.

The experimental design used in this study is described by Campbell and Stanley (1963) as a post-test only-control group design and is diagrammed as follows:

R	X_A	O
R	X_B	O
R		O

Where R stands for randomized assignment to treatment groups, X_A stands for materials taken as a group (Group A), X_B stands for materials taken individually, and O stands for the criterion measure.

The basic differences between materials received by students in Group A and Group B are: 1) directions referred to groups in one case and individuals in the other; and 2) the comments and feedback provided by member interaction in Group A was not available in Group B. An example of both types of differences is this set of passages taken from the booklets:

> (Group A) The next five statements are prefaced by the phrase, "You seem to feel..." However, some are actually thinking statements. Privately place a check next to those that are thinking rather than feeling statements. After having read all five statements, and checked as instructed above, work to achieve group consensus on the scoring of each statement. (Statements and correct answers given).
>
> (Group B) The next five statements are prefaced by the phrase, "You seem to feel..." However, some are actually thinking statements. Place a check next to those that are thinking rather than feeling statements. (Statements and correct answers given).

Instructional content was identical for both groups, and any "outside information" was limited by restricting participation to those students who had had no previous training in empathic responding.

Evaluation procedures--the criterion exercise. Directions for the criterion exercises were identical for all groups. Upon completion of the instructional materials, for Groups A and B, and without instruction for Group C, the students formed triads for the exercise.

During the exercise one student took the role of speaker (or client), another took the role of listener (or counselor), and the third was an observer. During the roleplay (which was limited to five minutes) the speaker recalled a problem situation from personal experience and the listener responded empathically when he considered it appropriate. The observer listened in so that he could give the listener feedback on his performance (although the feedback was not given until the criterion exercise was completed). Roles were then rotated and the exercise was repeated with a new problem situation. The exercise continued until each student performed the criterion role of listener.

Upon completion of each roleplay the listener was rated by each triad member (including himself) on his accurateness of empathy, timing of response, response form and on a summary rating. Accuracy and timing were rated on a five-category scale as to how often the listener performed properly for each factor. Form was a combination of three five-category ratings on sub-items of: use of synonym, use of tentative statement and relating feeling to situation. The summary rating was 1 to 5 good-bad semantic differential. When the students were finished with the criterion exercise, each rated the course on a five-point scale.

Separate tape recordings of each roleplay were made to be used by the faculty judges. Three faculty judges, two social work faculty members and one of the researchers were involved in prior discussions on evaluating empathic responding in order to increase inter-rater reliability. Each judge listened to the recordings and independently rated the speaker using the same instrument used by the students. Although the judges were familiar with the instructional materials and the experimental design, they listened to the tape recordings in a random and unidentified order.

The criterion exercise was a compromise between rigor and pragmatism. The fact that each speaker created a unique problem example introduced an undesirable element of error variance in the criterion situation. A more uniform situation would have been to use actors as speakers and a standard problem situation. However, since the criterion exercise was as much a test of the ability of the students to control the evaluation as to test the effectiveness of the materials the criterion situation described above was selected. It was assumed that the "quality" of the problem situation was random across groups. This assumption was tested by having judges rate each of the problem examples on five-point scale, as to the amount and variety of feeling expressed. Comparison of ratings across groups showed no differences.

A second methodological concern in the evaluation was a possible "teaching effect" occurring as the exercise progressed. That is, listeners involved in second or third-round roleplays may have acquired skills from observing previous rounds. Again, a comparison of judges' ratings across rounds showed no such effect.

Table 1

Separate and Combined Judges' Rating: Descriptive Data and Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficents.

	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Min	Max	Inter-rater Reliability
Judge A						
Accuracy	17	2.53	1.12	1	5	
Timing	17	2.47	1.37	1	5	
Form	17	7.53	3.41	3	15	
Summary	17	2.82	1.47	1	5	
Judge B						
Accuracy	17	2.82	0.81	2	4	
Timing	17	2.41	1.06	1	5	
Form	17	8.06	2.79	5	15	
Summary	17	2.82	1.38	1	5	
Judge C						
Accuracy	17	2.35	1.06	1	5	
Timing	17	2.35	0.93	1	4	
Form	17	6.94	2.75	3	12	
Summary	17	2.41	1.23	1	5	
Combined						
Accuracy	17	7.70	2.44	4	12	.87
Timing	17	7.24	2.84	4	12	.85
Form	17	22.71	8.16	11	38	.88
Summary	17	8.06	3.45	4	14	.88

Table 2

Comparison of Combined Judge Ratings
Between Groups

Comparison X_1	X_2	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	S_1	S_2	DF	T
Group A: Group C							
Accuracy		6.17	10.40	3.37	1.80	9	-4.28***
Timing		5.33	10.80	2.27	.70+	9	-7.20****
Form		18.33	31.80	19.07	19.70	9	-5.05****
Summary		5.67	12.00	3.47	3.50	9	-5.60****
Group B: Group C							
Accuracy		7.00	10.40	3.60	1.80+	9	-3.35**
Timing		6.17	10.80	4.57	.70+	9	-4.53***
Form		19.00	31.80	25.60	19.70	9	-4.41***
Summary		7.17	12.00	8.57	3.50	9	-3.18*
Group A: Group B							
Accuracy		6.17	7.00	3.37	3.60	10	-0.77
Timing		5.33	6.17	2.27	4.57	10	-0.78
Form		18.33	25.60	19.07	25.60	10	-0.78
Summary		5.67	7.17	3.47	8.57	10	-1.06

* .05
** .01
*** .005
**** .001
\+ test of difference in variance significant beyond .05

Results

Means and standard deviations of separate and combined ratings of judges on accuracy, timing, form and summary ratings are displayed in Table 1. Also shown is the combined correlation coefficient for judge inter-rater reliability for each measure. Because of equipment malfunction, one roleplay was not recorded, thereby reducing the N of judges' ratings to 17.

Combined ratings were treated as interval data and t-tests were used to compare each group on each measure. Question 1 concerned the possibility of learning empathic responding through self-instruction. Table 2 shows that both the small group (Group A) and the individual students (Group B) performed significantly better on all measures than the control group (Group C).

With regard to Question 2, a lack of significant differences between Group A and Group B would indicate no apparent advantage of small group instruction over individual instruction. Nor did differences between these groups appear in subjective student ratings of the mini-course as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of Student Course Ratings Between Group A and Group B

Comparison							
X_1	X_2	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	S_1	S_2	DF	t
Group A:Group B course rating		2.17	2.67	0.17	0.27	10	-1.86

Table 4

Separate and Combined Student Ratings: Discriptive and Inter-Reliability Coefficients

	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	Min	Max	Inter-Rater Reliability
Listener						
Accuracy	18	2.39	0.70	2	4	
Timing	18	2.44	0.51	2	3	
Form	18	6.78	1.31	4	9	
Summary	18	2.28	0.75	1	4	
Speaker						
Accuracy	18	2.11	0.68	1	3	
Timing	18	2.06	0.54	1	3	
Form	18	6.89	1.23	4	9	
Summary	18	1.94	0.64	1	3	
Combined						
Accuracy	18	4.50	1.10	3	7	.78
Timing	18	4.50	0.71	3	6	.62
Form	18	13.67	1.26	11	17	.58
Summary	18	4.22	1.26	2	7	.91

Student ratings were also collected on all measures for each role-play. For each listener ratings were collected from the speaker and the listener (self ratings); however, due to a confusion of directions, incomplete data was collected from students in the role of observer. Student evaluation analysis was limited to ratings from the speaker and the listener. Student ratings and inter-rater reliability coefficients were quite high as shown in Table 4.

Question 3 was concerned with the ability of students to rate themselves and each other. This was answered by comparing student individual and combined ratings with judges' combined ratings for each factor. Correlation coefficients are displayed for each criterion measure in Table 5. None of the correlations are significant.

Table 5

Correlation Coefficients for Judge and Separate and Combined Student Ratings

	Accuracy	Timing	Form	Summary
Judges: listener	.14	-.04	.00	-.01
Judges: speaker	.24	-.29	.26	.24
Judges: combined	.24	-.25	.13	.12

Discussion. Results indicate that the mini-course was very effective in both the individual and group versions. Highly significant differences on all measures attest to the ability of a self-instructional package to teach affective skills. Such results should encourage other educators to develop and test materials in other affective areas of human service professional training.

The fact that there were no differences between small group and individual performance and the fact that both forms were successful suggests no advantage of one version over the other. However, criteria other than student performance may suggest various advantages and disadvantages. Administratively, the individual version may obviate students waiting for groups to form (assuming that the criterion exercise can be individualized). On the other hand, some students may prefer the company and interaction of others during their learning. The availability of both versions would provide the student and/or administrator with either option.

The lack of correlation between judge ratings and student ratings appears to be due to the inability or unwillingness of students to be discriminating in their evaluations. Table 4 shows small standard deviations and narrow ranges in ratings. This situation creates two difficulties: 1) if the course were to be offered for credit, student evaluation could not be used for grades; and more importantly 2) lack of discriminating feedback neither reinforces good performance nor assists the learner in correcting poor performance.

One measure to offset the students' poor evaluation performance would be to return the evaluation function to the faculty member. However, the researchers suggest, a better approach would be both to train for and encourage more discrimination in student feedback. An additional unit could be included in the package which would teach students to identify taped examples of good and bad empathic responding. Further explanation of the instructional values of discriminating feedback may assist students in overcoming any reluctance they may have of being "too judgemental" of their peers.

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